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ABSTRACT

Since 1982, the Quality Assurance Committee of the New England Online Users Group (NENON) has focused on communicating online searchers' problems to system vendors and database producers, primarily by distributing check-off and fill-in-the-blank forms to NENON members, collecting and tabulating the forms, and forwarding them to the vendors and producers once a year. Although individual problems are often perceived to be minor or transitory, collectively they add up to significant frustration and inconvenience. Guidelines for diagnosing system problems and an easy, efficient way to systematically report both system problems (e.g., noisy lines, system disconnects, lost search strategies, slow response times, and inability to logon or reconnect) and errors in database records enable searchers to respond more appropriately and take constructive action. Moreover, feedback from other user groups would contribute to the collective clout of online searchers. By taking responsibility for communicating these issues to the vendors, online searchers should be able to improve online services and retain more control over their use of the services. Troubleshooting guidelines and a NENON Quality Assurance Trouble Report form are included. (KM)

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Quality Assurance and Online Searching: Empowering the Searcher

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Quality Assurance Committee

One of the first committees of the New England Online Users Group (NENON) to be formed was the Quality Assurance Committee. Like motherhood and apple pie, quality is easy to be in favor of but it's sometimes hard to figure out just what to do about it. Committee members issued frequent pleas that members pass on copies of letters to vendors reporting problems with searches, but over several years only two or three reports were received. We knew from our own experiences that the problems were out there.

Since 1982 the Quality Assurance Committee has concentrated on communicating online searchers' problems, dissatisfactions and detections of errors to system networks, vendors and database producers, primarily by distributing check off and fill in the blank forms to NENON members. Once filled out, the forms are sent back to the Quality Assurance Committee, tabulated and forwarded to database vendors, telecommunications networks or database producers.

Searcher Responsibilities and Concerns

Online searchers have the responsibility for the development of an appropriate search strategy, the accurate keying in of the search and flexible interaction during the online session. These are issues that are directly within our control as search analysts. Should we also share the burden of search related problems which are beyond our immediate control such as: noisy lines, slow response time, system disconnects or inaccuracies in databases? Have you ever been apologetic to a patron when you couldn't log on to a vendor system? Do you feel uncomfortable watching the dollar figure mount as you suffer the slow response time on a Friday afternoon? Do you get a sinking feeling after you have input a thirty statement search and you get dropped from the system? Do you ignore garbage on the lines?

Every searcher has experienced difficulties with faulty transmission or "dirty data" but few searchers take the time to report these problems to the appropriate sources. Individual problems appear to be minor or transitory, perhaps even insignificant, yet collectively they add up to hours of lost time and inconvenience. There are very few online industry statistics or studies to indicate the nature and frequency of these problems, but they do exist. The busy online professional is concerned about errors and inaccuracies, but has had no formal means of communicating this concern to the major online vendors.

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Trouble Reports

Our trouble report project grew out of a discussion of how frustrated committee members were when they tried to track down the source of online problems. It was hard not to feel that we were getting the run around as vendors implicated telecommunications suppliers and vice versa and everybody seemed ready to blame the searchers.

We also knew that we had ourselves failed to report problems we'd experienced, because most incidents, in isolation, didn't seem serious enough to justify a letter. It was only in the aggregate that our difficulties would seem worth complaining about.

To make it easier for searchers to report problems, we designed a check off form, to be duplicated by members and kept near their terminal(s). The form and troubleshooting guidelines were introduced at the NENON Fall Meeting in November 1982. Copies of the trouble report are regularly printed in our newsletters to remind searchers of this project. Completion of the form serves a dual purpose. First the online searcher is provided with an immediate means of venting frustration, but more importantly, these reports provide the data for the Quality Assurance Committee to submit to system suppliers.

Once a year all forms are collected and routed to the appropriate vendors. During the first year of the project (1983), members sent us 279 trouble reports detailing problems with Telenet, Tymnet, Uninet, BRS, Dialog, SDC and NLM. Interest in this project waned so that for 1984 we received only 51 trouble reports. During 1985 there was some renewed interest and we recorded 105 responses. Considering that there are over 300 members in NENON and assuming that everyone experiences at least one to twenty problems per year, we hypothesize that the statistics we have compiled represent only the tip of the iceberg.

Troubleshooting Telecommunications Problems

It is often difficult to diagnose the source of the problem you may be having with your terminal. Problems can reside with the telephone, terminal, telecommunications network or vendor. In order to assist our members in diagnosing and solving system irregularities, the Quality Assurance Committee has developed some troubleshooting guidelines.

The printing of garbled lines or extra characters is an indication of noisy lines. This is usually a telecommunications problem and is often due to circumstances beyond your control. Telephone lines which go through a switchboard can be a problem and dedicated lines are always preferred. Sometimes this problem clears up quickly, but often the best solution is to change to another network. If you continue to experience these problems, note the port to which you were connected. The networks need the port number to trace the source of the problem.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

If your terminal stops printing in mid-citation and the light on your terminal or modem goes out, you have been disconnected. Use of the break key one or more times may disconnect you. Try to reconnect immediately; remember that search strategies are saved for varying lengths of time depending on vendor.

Response times may vary depending on the time of day. Mornings and Saturdays are faster than late afternoons. Sometimes the system response time is so slow, it is difficult to distinguish slow response time from actually being disconnected. Some vendors advise hanging up quickly and trying to reconnect. If you are unsuccessful in reconnecting, then try other networks or vendors.

Since the project began we have talked to vendors and networks and looked for literature on the subject. Vendors and networks were generally very helpful and offered specific suggestions. There was virtually no literature to be found. Telenet, Tymnet and Uninet each publish brochures on the use of their systems, available by calling their 800 telephone numbers. In the years since we first introduced the trouble reports we have been gratified to notice more attention being paid to troubleshooting, particularly in user newsletters.

FIGURE 2

TROUBLESHOOTING GUIDELINES

PROBLEM	RECOMMENDATION
Logon	Begin again. Consult manual for logon procedure. Read system error message and respond to prompts. Check equipment settings.
Noisy lines	Change networks or telephone lines. Use the most appropriate terminal ID for your terminal. Noisy lines can be caused by electrical interference from nearby equipment. Rain or thunderstorms can interfere with telecommunications. Check acoustic coupler and telephone mouthpiece.
Disconnects	Try to reconnect immediately, use same communications network. Search strategies are saved by all vendors for varying times. You should get a reconnect message. Down time is usually 5 to 30 minutes. Call customer service if you cannot reconnect or your password is already in use.
Slow response time	Hang up and reconnect.

Conclusion

Database vendors and telecommunications suppliers seem to be becoming more aware of the needs and problems of online users. We hope that they will continue to offer guidance on trouble-shooting and problem avoidance. The Quality Assurance Committee of the New England Online Users Group intends to continue its trouble report project, as one part of this ongoing dialog between users and suppliers.

Feedback from other online user groups would contribute to the collective clout of online searchers. We invite you to take the trouble report and make copies for yourself and your friends and colleagues. Keep a stack by your terminal. Send them to NENON at the address on the bottom of the form. We'll be happy to share our results with other user groups.

By taking responsibility for communicating our needs, online searchers should be able to help improve online services and exert more control over their use of online searching.

NENON QUALITY ASSURANCE TROUBLE REPORT
&*###$%!!

Date _____ Time _____ AM / PM Network _____

Vendor _____ Port number _____
(follows terminal ID)

PLEASE CHECK AS MANY BOXES AS APPLY.

---

1) NOISY LINES ☐

Approximate number of NOISY LINES _____

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2) DISCONNECTED ☐

System message received? Please specify _____

☐ I reconnected after _____ minutes.

Search strategy was ☐ saved ☐ not saved.

☐ I could not logon.

☐ My password was already in use.

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3) SLOW RESPONSE TIME ☐

☐ I waited and the search started up again (after _____ minutes).

☐ I hung up (after _____ minutes).

OTHER PROBLEMS OR COMMENTS

Name/Library (optional) _____

TROUBLE REPORTS WILL BE BATCHED AND SENT TO VENDORS AND NETWORKS MONTHLY.

Please send these forms to Quality Assurance Committee
NENON, Inc.
P.O. Box 753
Cambridge, MA 02238

Questions?? Call Mary Chitty at (617)732-2813